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Jenny White, Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks

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- 1 In the midst of the newly emerging interest in Turkey's role in the Middle East, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks* makes a timely contribution to the literature as it expands our knowledge about the recent influence that Islam had on the evolution of Turkish nationalism. The author constructs the general architecture of the book around a deep-seated tension that she observes in Turkish society between collective belongings and liberal freedoms. She sees 'Muslim nationalism,' which is the name that she gives to the Islamic-rooted nationalists in Turkey, as loosening this tension by producing a shift from the old national paradigm, which was based on a narrative of bloodlines, to an alternative cultural outlook that includes 'a bewildering variety of choices of values, practices, and modes of affiliation' (187). It is in the spirit of such pluralism that the author gives a comprehensive account of 'competing and overlapping cultures of Turkishness and other forms of national subjectivity' (18). However, White is also critical of Muslim nationalism due to its tendency to impose its own hegemonic norms on such liberal plurality. These observations ultimately lead her towards a conceptual puzzle that opens up a new set of questions for the literature to consider. That is, how does 'the traditional nationalist emphasis on Turkishness remain intact' given that 'the meaning of being Turkish and being Muslim' (49) is radically altered?
- 2 One of the main merits of this book is its ability to draw a clear conceptual distinction between the old and new nationalisms in Turkey. According to the author Muslim nationalism should be set apart from the old paradigm because it adopts an 'unorthodox view of the nation and its borders' that is 'modeled on a more flexible and inclusive Ottoman past' (50). She develops this insight further by highlighting the ways that the Turkish government under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has managed to minimize the conflict with its neighboring countries, took the global trade to

an unprecedented level and showed willingness to recognize some of the minority and individual rights that were traditionally overlooked by the Turkish Republic. As the author dwells on these liberal steps that were taken by the Turkish government, she finds the critical leverage to explain how 'the Islam-rooted AKP' can also be 'enthusiastic developers of a globalized economy... political liberalization, international political alliances, and in many cases EU membership' (10-11). By framing the problem this way she manages to step outside of those binaries like secularism/religion, East/West, and Islam/liberalism that have been conventionally used to make sense of Turkish nationalism.

- 3 Another useful insight that the book introduces to the discussion has to do with what it has to say about the cultural origins of Turkish nationalism. White considers the repressive tendency in Turkish nationalism as a symptom of a deeper social tension between the dominance of 'powerful group identities and norms' and the precariousness of 'individual liberty' (15). When the secularists deprive college students of the freedom to wear headscarf to secure the modern identity of the nation and the religious organizations present the missionary activities as a threat against the moral integrity of the nation, she contends, both groups make concessions on liberalism to further their own aspirations. She develops this argument further by tracing numerous occasions of 'cultural aversion to mixing, coupled with anxiety that the boundaries that demarcate the border between "us" and "them"' (102). Her discussion on cosmopolitanism, suburbanization and gentrification is particularly helpful to understand the dominant resistance in Turkish culture towards hybridity.
- 4 It is in recognition of such prevalent practices of intolerance towards pluralism and hybridity that the author sees Muslim nationalism as potentially betraying its own liberal premises. Along these lines she expresses a certain level of skepticism towards the rising nostalgia for the Ottoman *millet* system. In the context of the public perception of non-Muslims, White sees this model as potentially, and sometimes actually, being used as an excuse to sustain the 'institutionalized gap between Turks-by-citizenship and Turks-by-nationality' (29) where Christians and Jews end up being treated 'as separate and unequal, but tolerated groups' (96). She also contends that the *millet* model and its reliance on Sunni Islam can loom large over Alevis and their unorthodox interpretation of Islam. She observes similar repressive tendencies when this discourse is used to address 'the Kurds as fellow Muslims' (13) to downplay their ethnic identity. The author explicates these points by tapping into a rich archive of examples, which include her reflections on the educational curriculums, her exchanges with army officials, politicians, journalists, businessmen and activists, and her participation in a nationalist anthropology conference.
- 5 The book additionally provides a close discursive analysis of the ways that gendered tropes such as the national 'honor (chastity and innocence)' (150) are used to sustain the integrity of Turkish nationalism. It does a good job of pointing out that Muslim nationalism certainly has a more flexible conception of the national borders and is less inclined to use the anxiety of penetration as its main point of reference. She also shows us how this new paradigm has been highly instrumental in emancipating Muslim women by placing the emphasis on their individuality. But the author adds that once the power becomes consolidated it tends to replay the traditional gender norms by demanding women to prioritize their traditional roles as mothers, daughters, sisters and wives over their individuality. It is for this reason that even though women do have a strong

presence in the Islamic movements in Turkey, their status 'does not extend to decision-making roles' (172). In this context I find White's critique of Saba Mahmood due to the latter's willingness to accept liberal principles as culturally contestable particularly interesting.

- 6 On a more critical note I would like to take issue with the author's decision to frame her argument around a stark binary between liberalism and collective belonging. This dualism, which mirrors the somewhat outdated debate in political theory between liberalism and communitarianism, is problematic because it pushes her to overplay the qualities that she attributes both to collective belonging and individual freedom. The work could provide a more comprehensive overview of Muslim nationalism and also be more receptive towards the complexities within Kemalism if the author had a more porous understanding of collective identities. This binary also induces her to adopt liberalism without coming to terms with some of its inadequacies. For example, White values liberalism for enabling individuals to become flexible enough to 'put on a coat of many colors and so stand with no one' (65). Yet she fails to mention that the same flexibility demanded by liberalism can also work the other way around and become a burden on people by placing them in an excessively contingent, and hence vulnerable, position.
- 7 Apart from these conceptual problems that originate from the author's decision to rely on the classical debate between liberalism and communitarianism, I think that the core argument of the book holds strong. In that regard *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks* is an innovative interpretation of the new nationalist paradigm that has been on the rise in Turkey. Its in-depth analysis of the competing nationalist discourses, ability to tap into a rich archive of ethnographic examples and introduction of a fresh insight into the literature will place this book in a central place in the forthcoming discussions on Turkey and its prospects of being a functioning model in the region.

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